



Space for circus skills and saving the planet

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# LOCAL ACTION GLOBAL GAIN

## A day in the life The Earth Circus Network

Having circled Rochelle Street school in London's East End three times and rattled the front gates, I was beginning to feel unwanted and intrusive, writes Susan Boddy. Once I discovered a side gate and introduced myself, I realised I could not have been more wrong. I was welcomed with hugs and smiles from the dozen or so caretakers who live in the school or use it for a range of projects.

Despite what turned out to be a rather unfriendly visit from an undercover journalist from the *Mail on Sunday*, Earth Circus are anxious that nobody should be turned away from the site, which they care for so it may be used constructively by the community.

The Victorian primary school building had stood empty for two years until last March. But care of the old building is only a small part of Earth Circus's project. Their chief aim is to raise awareness and implement the principles of Agenda 21 at a grassroots level. The Agenda 21 agreement, signed by the 179 countries at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, was a blueprint for a sustainable future, tackling poverty and environmental problems locally so as to make a difference globally. Every borough

throughout the UK is meant to have its own Agenda 21 policy, but policymakers have made diverse interpretations of national guidelines. Phoenix, one of the Earth Circus group, is emphatic that Agenda 21 should be about everyone's ideas, not just those of councillors. Every room in the school is evidence of this, from the drawings on the walls sent in by local children to the recycling stores, such as the 'surfer project' where computer equipment, salvaged from skips and scrap

### **Computers are salvaged, repaired and redistributed**

stores, is repaired and redistributed to community groups.

One of the commitments of Agenda 21 is to provide access to land, credit and low-cost building materials to the homeless, landless and unemployed. Earth Circus believes that one disused building in every borough should be used for environmental community projects. Enfield Council has given two previously disused buildings to the group and these are used as recycling centres and

information shops on Agenda 21.

Meanwhile, Rochelle Street school is a base for networking between similar groups. Hundreds of people visit every week, the busiest day being Saturday. Money is short, of course, but this is overcome through ingenuity and talent. On 8 June, in the old school gym, group members performed comedy acts, improvised drama, poetry recitals and circus skills to a 300-strong audience of all ages and backgrounds, raising money which was put back into the Earth Circus Network.

Rochelle Street school is owned by an offshore company, Graphic Properties Ltd, which took the occupants to court in April under the Criminal Justice Act Interim Possession Order. At a second court appearance in late June, Graphic Properties were awarded possession of the old school. The consequence of evictions is to scatter the occupants of buildings and break the communication networks which have been built up. The Earth Circus caretakers have been advised to expect bailiffs within weeks, and plans will then go ahead to convert the school into 34 flats. The gains made by the group could disappear unless new initiatives are built up by those who have benefited from the school in recent months.

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